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ABSTRACT

A half-century or more of experience with the traditional junior high school has led many educators to conclude that it is failing to answer the needs of preadclescent and early adolescent children (transescents). The middle school approach can provide the best kind of educational program for children undergoing rapid physical, mental, emotional, and social growth, acccrding to the authors. They outline the elements cf an effective middle school program, including grade organization, schocl administration and staffing, curriculum, and team teaching. (Author/DS)

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MIDDLE SCHOOL

a position paper

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PURPOSES OF THIS BOOKLET

In the continual search for better educational programs, many educators, school board members and parents are in the throes of making educational changes through grade level reorganization. During the decade of the sixties and into the seventies, much of this reorganization involved the middle school years of the K-12 school ladder and has produced what has come to be popularly known as the middle school.

As with any new organization, numerous questions arise. In this case, the questions frequently asked are, "What is a middle school?" "Is the middle school a better organization for the pre-adolescent or early adolescent?" "What instructional strategies are needed to meet the needs of this group of students?"

The purpose of this position paper is to attempt to provide the reader with some guidelines for considering the problem of what kind of educational program for this unique group of students and then how to proceed to plan and implement such a program.

The Authors

The Middle School

A Position Paper

M.A.M.S.E.
Michigan Association of Middle School Educators

An organization interested in developing an educational program designed for the pre-adolescent

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Michigan Association of Middle School Educators is a nonprofit educational corporation engaged in the development of middle schools, and educational programs designed to meet the needs of the transescent. This organization is open to teachers, administrators, parents, and college personnel. Further information may be obtained by writing to Michigan State University, Erickson Hall 406, East Lansing, Michigan 48823.

Single Copies of this monograph are $2.00. Five or more copies are $1.00 per copy. Make checks payable to M.A.M.S.Σ. when purchasing publications. Send orders to Michigan State University, Erickson Hall 406, East Lansing, Michigan, 48823.

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THE MIDDLE SCHOOL

A POSITION PAPER

HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND:

The American Junior High School preceded the concept of "Middle School." In the early 20th century, the first junior high schools were organized for worthy reasons, but almost immediately became "junior" high schools. In 1905, some two-thirds of all pupils left school before reaching the ninth grade. In response to this condition, educators proposed an organization which would give youth some rudiments of secondary education and a little vocational training. To accomplish this task, it seemed logical to create a new two or three year organization which included the last year or two of elementary school and the first or freshman year of high school; thus the original initiators of the junior high school conceived it as terminal education for some of the students enrolled and as an academic introduction for those capable and financially able to continue their education.

The birthplace of the junior high school was probably Berkeley, California, in 1910 and was followed by similar provisions in other cities including Columbus, Ohio and Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The early sponsors were satisfied that the idea of a junior high school was pedagogically sound and that a separate unit of school organization was the appropriate administrative mechanism for implementing it.

Following the inception of the junior high school and up to the present time, the original functions of the school have been changed significantly. At present, we find that the junior high school is no longer what its founders conceived it to be. It has developed weaknesses which have led educators to conclude, with reluctance but with honesty, that it is not meeting the needs of the age group for which it was originally intended. A close look at the patterns of the junior high school and the senior high school indicates great similarity of structure and function. The junior high school often apes the senior high school in athletics, in sophisticated social events, in class scheduling, in departmentalization, in the use of marching bands and in the employment of elaborate graduation exercises. To draw attention to this condition, Dr. James Conant pointedly states that junior high schools have become "pale carbon copies" of senior high schools.

While the junior high school was originally intended as protection for the young adolescent through a paced induction into the complexities of senior high school, the present emphasis appears to be one of earlier and earlier participation in adult activities for which youth at this age are ill-prepared. Margaret Mead, the noted anthropologist, has criticized the junior high school of today stating that when a type of school which was designed to cushion the shock of change in scholastic demands has become the focus of the social pressures which were once exerted in senior high school, our problems have been multiplied.

Psychologists who have studied the problems of early adolescents point out that the change from elementary to junior high school is poorly timed for children. They declare that in the midst of deciding who they are, they shouldn't have to waste considerable energy finding out where they are. Psychologists further state that during the highly volatile years of eleven through fourteen, youngsters should have a familiar, secure background in which to operate. The present junior high school fails to provide this essential element.

The Nature of the Transescent Child Today

The transescent child, eleven through fourteen, may be defined as pre-adolescent or early adolescent in nature. The use of the term transescent serves graphically to emphasize the unique nature of this age group emerging from a variety of psychological and social factors bearing on the group. Many of these conditions are elements which have not existed previously. They have resulted from changes in our social patterns and from changes in the patterns of

psychological development resulting from conditions which did not previously exist.

In examining the physical characteristics of the transescent child, we find that he is on the average taller and enjoys better nutrition than his age group in previous generations. He is physically healthier. He enjoys greater mobility, has more freedom, and is better informed. Physical development varies widely within and between sexes. Though ten-year old boys are larger physically than girls, girls 11-12 are larger than boys. Body and muscular development is erratic and disaproportionate. Coordination is spo-

Thin people, fat people, tall people, short people — all transescents!

radic; yet energy and restlessness abound, and the need for physical activity often surpasses other needs. Sex maturation begins but a wide range of development exists. Sex antagonism becomes acute and modesty appears. At the same time, awareness of the opposite sex emerges and concern for physical appearance becomes evident.

Mentally, the transescent becomes a willing learner, particularly regarding things which are useful, which answer his questions, which are related to his interests. He is concerned with solving problems which are real. He begins to develop concern about earning money and is interested in learning about occupations. He is losing his interest in fantasy and shows a growing concern with current events and people. Performance fluctuates widely and is unstable since growth of the total child determines how much he can learn and do. Although he wants to try to experiment, he still needs a secure place to which he can retreat. He is acutely and painfully aware of his failures. *It is important at this age that growth takes place through success.*

Emotionally, he shows erratic or inconsistent behavior. He can be estatically happy or utterly deflated and can move with spontaneity from one mood to another. He can be a loving child or a pouting, surly one and can reverse himself and expect adult approval and acceptance. He wants and needs sympathy, success and recognition as an individual. He is gaining in poise and self-assurance but situations can reveal his extreme shyness. The slightest rebuke can temporarily destroy him. He is growing strong slowly but still has many fears, both real and imagined. The pressure to succeed is keenly and acutely felt.

Socially, the transescent is also unique. Peer group prestige becomes more important than adult approval. Age codes exist for dress and actions and he wants desperately to be a member of the group; yet, he wants and needs a stable environment. While attempting to break away, he is soon lost without family and school security. Competition is keen but good sportsmanship is important. He is concerned with ideals and ethical concepts and is eager for social service. He wants to do things himself but is inconsistent in following through on responsibilities. Both sexes are noisy and restless. There appears to be a clearly developing earlier interest in the opposite sex. The problems of dating and popularity rating are more a concern for this age group now than a decade ago.

There are a number of social characteristics which need to be considered. Sociologists have pointed out, for example, that a change is occuring in the size and organization of the family. In the past the school was a supplement to the activities of the family in making adults of the children. Today the home is more and more supplement to the transescent's life which focuses increasingly on the school.

The advent of widespread travel and the changing impact of television programs has served to hasten the maturation of transescents, thus making them ready for social activities at an earlier age than previously.

While those characteristics are generalizations of the nature of the transescent, they serve to establish,

clearly, *the need to have a special and particular school organization and curriculum available for boys and girls going through this difficult and important period in their lives.*

In considering the nature of junior high programs as these presently exist, we cannot help but note that we are doing an injustice to the nature of the children who need our help. We rob them of their childhood by organizing their games and structuring their play activities according to adult rules and standards. We place great significance on performance and achievement and unfairly accelerate the process of childhood development. We have propelled our children toward maturity and independence and have insisted that they assume responsibility before they are ready for it. At the same time, we do not permit the independence characteristic of adult behavior and roles. The child, in short, is urged both to "hurry up" and then to "wait!"

To stem this disturbing development and to provide a truly appropriate and sound program for the education of the transescent, a school program which recognizes the unique characteristics of this age group is necessary.

The middle school can provide the needed vehicle for accomplishing this objective. Utilizing the most recent scientific findings of studies of this age group and knowledge of the process of education, we can reorganize our existing resources, aided by specialists, to develop the unique program required.

The Middle School — A New Effort

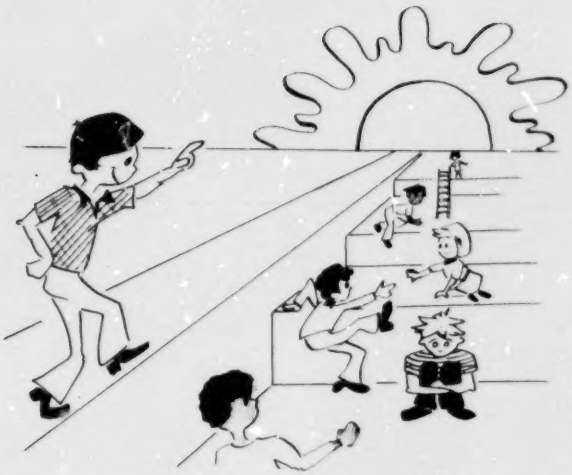
Accepting the fact of present unmet needs of transescent children in today's schools, the task of planning the kind of program required for these children involves a number of important considerations. For one, the middle school must be the term applied to the new organizational structure and program. The failure of the present junior high school to achieve its original objectives and its deterioration into a watered-down version of the senior high school precludes use of the term junior high school. A new term is necessary for the psychological benefit which this would have upon staff, children, parents and other citizens of the community. They can logically expect a new and adequate program to grow out of this new idea.

A second consideration is that the recognition of transescent needs calls for acceptance by boards of education of the philosophy of the middle school. Acceptance must be followed by the development of a consistent school organization which will permit success. The sincerity and purpose of this intent must permeate to middle echelon administration, to the principal and through him to the teaching staff. Support for the middle school concept is equally necessary from the parents and other citizens of the community. Educational programs can only be successful through the efforts of teachers and parents who believe in the middle school. This translates into parents and teachers who care about the transescent child. If teachers are to care about their students, so must the school system care about its teachers. Middle schools and their teachers must have status positions in the school organization. To develop permanent staff for this level, a continuous program of in-service education is required. Planning, diagnostic research and development staffs can work with and through local administration and teachers to develop measurable objectives along with new curriculum and improved methods for teaching the transescent. Facilities can be designed and built to implement a unique middle school.

System Organization

The middle school should include a grouping of at least three grades; six, seven and eight are recommended. But the middle school is not a grouping by grades but a grouping of ages, normally ages 11 through 14. In the middle school, children can be grouped in a flexible manner according to their abilities and needs rather than in a rigid grade pattern. In the home room situation to be described, children can be grouped chronologically while in skills development activities, variable groupings can be done as their individual needs require.

The question of failure or promotion is one which must be dealt with by the middle school. The present method of moving children through the middle grades requires rethinking and modification. Presently, children are advanced or retained on the basis of achievement scores, academic grades, age and other educa-



Nongraded organization allows students to progress at their individual rate regardless of human development.

tional factors. Some children are retained once, and even twice, during grades three to eight. In doing so, a failure syndrome is created which leads to the early discouragement and ultimate dropout of far too many students; therefore, it is recommended that the first eight years of school be chronological and continuous. What is recommended is a "no-retention-zero reject" school plan. Retention should be considered only in exception cases of physical and emotional immaturity. Research has long shown that retention in grades does *not* promote better learning, but in fact, may create a learning block. Certainly among the educationally disadvantaged, mass failures and multiple failures have a debilitating effect on motivation. The lack of success can only lead to rejection of the educational environment and probably alienation.

Failures create physical and social problems at the middle grade level because these tend to increase the age range of the students involved from 11-14 to 11-17. The uniqueness of the transescent, the variation in his rate of motivation and his peer group orientation, has been stressed. Academic heterogeneity does not present a problem to the child but physical and social heterogeneity do. Academic heterogeneity is a problem only to adults. This concern has led to difficulties. If peer group influence is to have a positive effect, it must be part of the total milieu of the school. Peer group behavioral and attitudinal patterns must not be established by the over-age failure-oriented student.

While there is little to be done in education to control physical and social growth, the educational program and climate can be controlled. The school organization can hold age as a relative constant through the first eight years. The educational program can be adapted rather than attempting to hold the program constant and ignore maturation levels.

Local School Organization and Staff

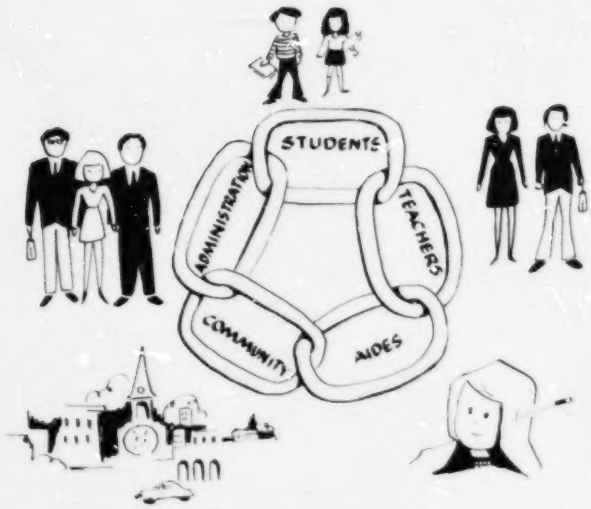
The middle school should be staffed with teachers who know the unique characteristics of the transescent child and who sincerely care about him.[1] The philosophy that the middle school exists to serve the transescent child should be accepted by the middle school teacher and become an essential part of his philosophy. Recruitment, selection and placement of teachers should place a high priority on this quality.

The planning of and responsibility for the middle school program can be shared by the teachers of the school along with the administration of the building and the central office. Teachers can become more student-oriented as against being subject-oriented. Each school can become an in-service center for teachers. Such a program will place a greater responsibility on central administration for developing building leadership. The building principal must be committed to the middle school concept and have the ability to transmit his convictions, his enthusiasm and his love for children to the staff. His primary function will be to develop and to maintain a staff which shares his commitment to the middle school program.

The central administration should develop a support program for each principal and building through assigned staff and cooperating colleges and universities. Such support would include the day-to-day administration of the school to permit adequate time and energy for instructional leadership in making for a desirable environment for learning and growing. The principal is the key; he sets the tone and the level of expectancy. In evaluating the outcomes of the middle school program, the role of the principal ought to be evaluated in terms of leadership provided.

The middle school should provide an environment of identity and communication. It must be sensitive to the individual so that the student can feel secure

1. See Romano, Louis, Nicholas P. Georgiady, and James E. Heald, *The Middle School: Selected Readings on an Emerging School Organization* for an excellent outline of these characteristics.



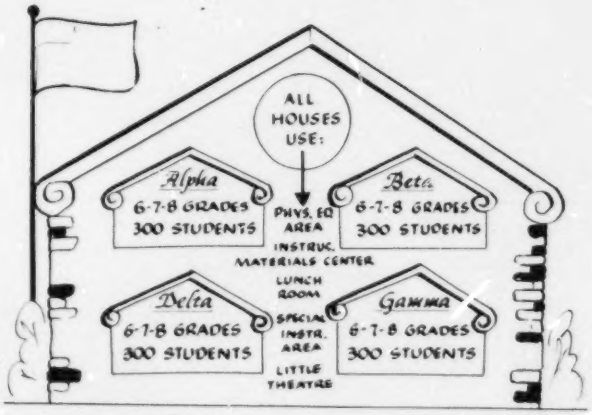
Parental interest and involvement in the education of the transescent is essential.

in the schools. Respect and concern for each student as an individual should permeate the entire staff. The school staff ought to work to increase communication between the student, the teacher, the counselor and the parent. There must be an adequate counselor-student ratio to permit the development of good rapport. Counselors assigned to a group of beginning middle school students should continue to counsel them while they remain in the middle school. The role of the counselor will have a personal rather than an academic orientation for the student. The counselor also serves as a staff person to the principal and teachers in interpreting the school environment from the standpoint of the students.

Parental interest and involvement in the education of children is essential. Communication between the home and the school should be on-going rather than being confined to those occasions when the student has academic or behavioral difficulties. Given the nature of the transescent child, efforts to assist him will require the knowledge and skills of school and home working cooperatively.

House Within The House

It is recommended that the middle school should consist of three to four houses, each containing grades six, seven and eight. Students then should be in a house having a total population of approximately 300-325 students. Each student remains in the same house



Greater opportunities for participation, leadership and socialization evolve in the "school within a school."

for three years so that close and warm relationships are fostered between students and the staff.

With the establishment of a school within a school, an esprit de corps will be developed with opportunities for participation, leadership and socialization. This type of school organization can assist in improving the self-concept of each individual child; furthermore, the house within the school concept will provide a warm, inviting, encouraging and enabling environment. The school becomes a place which students feel belongs to them, where they can leave their books, experiments and other personal things.

Assuming that the individual is being served by dividing the school into houses, there are other facets which need to be considered. The non-graded concept should permeate throughout the development of strategies for the teaching-learning act. Students should be placed in instructional groups according to their needs. Such an arrangement would necessitate placement of students of various age levels into certain learning groups with instructional materials to meet the special needs of these students. This type of grouping calls for a wealth of resources for the slow, average and above average learner.

Greater pupil growth necessitates the grouping of the professional staff into teaching teams where there is full utilization of individual teacher talents. The teachers should complement each other in differing skills and personalities. They should retain their identity with the students over a three-year period. The counselor for each house should be identified with the teaching team.

The Curriculum

By curriculum we mean both the content and the methods of teaching. The method of teaching as a means of developing self-motivation and self-direction is far more important than a fixed content format. It is at this level that learning responsibilities are increasingly transferred to the student. This does not mean that students are presented content and are then held responsible for its retention. It means a greater responsibility for teachers in motivating the student toward the seeking of knowledge rather than a responsibility for the teaching of knowledge. In this way, motivation and the development of the challenge and the pressure of learning become the major goal of the curriculum. The task of the middle school becomes that of supporting the student with innovative, individualized strategies of learning.

In developing the curriculum of the middle school, several considerations constitute important elements of the program. These include the following:

1. A strong skills development program (such as linguistics and mathematics) is an essential element; however, this program is based on individual needs of students rather than on group standards which ignore the fact of varying interests and differing rates of development among individuals.

2. Experiences of an exploratory nature (such as space technology) which permit in-depth study rather than a superficial touching upon a variety of topics and problems.

3. The extensive uses of inquiry and discovery as the vehicles for carrying on open-ended studies. Recognition that education, as a process, really has no terminal point, makes this approach essential. The encouragement of pupils to assume responsibility for developing and carrying on their own learning plans and activities insofar as is possible is appropriate to the middle school.

4. Opportunities to serve the community provide middle school children with a satisfaction of their growing social consciousness. The same psychological phenomenon which has characterized the success of the Peace Corps among older youth, is found in its beginnings among transescent children of the middle school. Community service projects related to social agencies can be developed and conducted with involvement of these children and youth.

5. Special learning centers to serve the exploratory needs and special interests of each child should constitute an important facility in the middle school. These centers operate on a flexible schedule and are open to pupils after school hours and on Saturdays. A well-planned and effectively operated center constitutes the heart of the middle school.

6. There should be a flexibility of class size and groupings in the middle school. These would be determined by the nature of the activities rather than on any arbitrary basis. Some activities would be carried on by individual pupils, others by a pupil working with a teacher. Still others would bring together a teacher with a small group of students. There would also be class-sized groups and occasional multi-class sized groups for appropriate activities.

7. The program of health and physical education in the middle school would be geared to the transescent pupil. The program utilizes personal hygiene activities, physical fitness activities, mixed boy-girl games, and a strong emphasis on activities having value in adult life, including camping, swimming, tennis and others.

8. Characteristics of children in the middle school age group indicate that they are ready and eager for experiences in the democratic process. Experiences can be designed through a student council for each house and an overall student council on a sincere and serious basis, not as "window dressing."

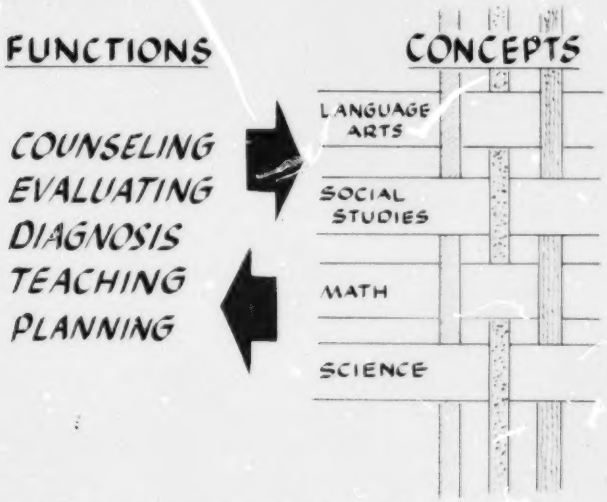
9. While the sequence of major units of study would be outlined, within each subject area there can be broad latitude permitting exercise of pupil-teacher planning.

Our concern is basically one of learning strategies and the organization and environment which will encourage the implementation of strategies. It is not

that content is considered irrelevant; on the contrary, schools must concentrate from preschool levels through the middle school on language development and basic skills; however, the methods of securing such development will need to be varied from most past practices.

Team Teaching

Teaching innovation begins with teachers and an organization which encourages and recognizes them for seeking improved results. Ongoing staff enthusiasm requires ongoing leadership. This leadership is needed at a level broader than the principal level; it is needed at the level where instruction takes place. This is middle management leadership or team leadership. Team organization at the middle school is



Team teaching maximizes teacher talents and provides opportunities for the inter-disciplinary approach.

needed to provide continuous leadership in the face of staff turnover, to implement school philosophy and program, to utilize varying teaching strengths, to provide on-line in-service training, and to effect teacher peer influence, unity and control. If the goals of the middle school are to be achieved and individual staff effectiveness maximized, a sub-organization within the school is necessary. The team approach can be developed around a family of subject areas so that teacher talents will complement one another.

Summary

A half century or more of experience with the junior high school has led growing numbers of educators to conclude that it is failing in its avowed purposes. The task of educating pre-adolescent and early adolescent children remains. To answer the continuing need, the middle school approach is presently receiving widespread attention.

Children in the age group of 11-14 years have needs and developmental characteristics which require a unique program. These children are undergoing rapid changes physically, mentally, socially and emotionally. Their education requires understanding of all of them as a group and of each of them as an individual. The program of the middle school should encourage skills development and at the same time provide for development of values in students. To accomplish these tasks, commitment is necessary from the Board of Education, through the Central office, including the building administration, and centers on the teacher, the parents and the child.

Organizational pattern should not hesitate to depart from the traditional classrooms of 25 to 35 students provided these changes are structured to accommodate the transescent age group.

The curriculum of the middle school should reflect the interests and needs of the transescent and should provide an environment where he can develop as an individual as well as a member of a social group.

Communication is essential between and among all the staff members working with middle school students in a team approach, to utilize their respective best talents.

It has been stated often that our children constitute our most precious resource. To neglect their fullest development is a waste. We would never know what talents, creativity and leadership never blossomed. Our professional task is concerned with preventing this kind of loss to our society.

Suggested Readings

Alexander, William M., Emmett I. Williams, and others, *The Emergent Middle School*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. New York, 1969.
An excellent general resource for the reader seeking a broad general background in the middle school concept. Numerous suggestions are incorporated into the text.

Overly, Donald E., Jon Rye Kinghorn, and Richard L. Preston, *The Middle School: Humanizing Education for Youth*, Charles A. Jones Publishing Company. Worthington, Ohio, 1972.

This reference presents ways to mold the middle school concept into means of personalizing instruction through curriculum development, and student and staff involvement, as well as facility planning and design.

Romano, Louis G., Nicholas P. Georgiady, and James E. Heald, *The Middle School: Selected Readings on an Emerging School Program*, Nelson-Hall Co., Chicago, Illinois, 1973.

To explain the middle movement, the editors have selected 57 readings covering virtually every aspect of the program. The readings are conveniently grouped into five major areas: 1. Introducing the Middle School, 2. This is the Transescent, 3. Curriculum Strategies, 4. Middle School Multipurpose Plant, and 5. Questions Facing the Middle School.

Michigan Journal of Secondary Education, Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals, Volume 12, No. 4, Summer 1971.

A collection of articles pertaining to the middle school concept. The articles are widely divergent in their approach and therefore serve to provide the reader with numerous suggestions for consideration.

Michigan Elementary Principal, East Lansing, Michigan, March-April 1973.

A collection of articles dealing with areas of concern for the middle schools. Excellent articles on guidance, evaluation and team teaching.

Michigan School Board Journal, East Lansing, Michigan, Fall, 1972.

A collection of articles related to the middle school written by practicing middle school people, and well-known middle school professors.

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